

Food Security Assessment

Why Countries Are At Risk

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Introduction

The world's resources are adequate to produce enough food for its population for at least the next few decades. The available food, however, is not distributed evenly. This means that many countries experience "food insecurity" when food supplies are not adequate to provide all people at all times with sufficient food for an active and healthy life. Although undernutrition is rarely viewed as an emergency, it reduces productivity and a society's long-term growth. Participants at the World Food Summit in November 1996 pledged "to reduce the number of undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015." The success of the World Food Summit pledge depends on the current state of global food security and governments' commitment to implement policies that can improve the situation.

The principal focus of food security policies has been to increase food supplies; little attention has been paid to unequal distribution of food as the cause of food insecurity. A review of nutritional data, however, shows that undernutrition is prevalent even in middle-income countries with ample food supplies. In fact, if the objective of the World Food Summit is to be met, not only do food supplies need to expand, but strategies for reducing poverty and inequality of purchasing power need to be adopted.

In this study, we evaluate two aspects of food security—availability and distribution of food—and analyze their trends through 2008. The study includes 66 countries that have been or are potential food aid recipients (see box, p.2). We project food consumption at

the aggregate level, as well as by different income groups, through the next decade. To assess food security of countries, we project shortfalls in food availability from that needed to maintain per capita consumption, to meet national nutritional requirements, and to meet nutritional requirements for each income group within a particular country. We also examine the feasibility of achieving food security by evaluating the required growth for the principal factors affecting food security—agricultural productivity, foreign exchange earnings, and population.

We project that food insecurity in many of the study countries will intensify unless the performance trends of the key contributing factors are improved. For the poorest countries, an increase in agricultural productivity is the key to improving food security. In these countries, imports play a small role in the domestic food supply because foreign exchange availability is limited. Raising productivity is not an easy task, however. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the region most vulnerable to undernutrition, grain yields must grow at a rate 60 percent higher than the growth achieved during 1980-97 to satisfy nutritional requirements by 2008. Achieving this goal will require a substantial increase in investment. In other regions, although there are vulnerable countries, the overall picture is more promising. In Asia, food security will improve if yields or imports continue to grow as they did during 1980-97. The challenge, however, is to overcome Asia's recent slowdown in yield growth and external financial difficulties that may pose food-security problems in the long term.